Absolute Innocence

One chilly day when I was in first grade, walking home alone from school, taking a shortcut through an alley behind my house, I found what I thought was a very cold mouse, asleep. I felt sorry for him and thought that if only I could get him warm, he would wake up, do cute little mousy things, and perhaps I would be

allowed to keep him as a pet. I had never had a pet. My baby brother had just been born and was something of a disappointment as a playmate, so I yearned for a lovable creature who would scamper about at my heels and learn tricks.

Very carefully, I picked him up. At the time, I had not yet read Stuart Little; so I was not expert at mouseology. I did realize that he was rather large for a mouse; but The Rats of Nimh had not yet been written, so I hadn’t read that either, and didn’t know that there were other, larger rodents in the same general family as mice. I carried him home cradled in one arm, and his tail, long and bare and very stiff, stuck out. He looked vulnerable and homely, with two visible front teeth – my own were missing at the time – and as I walked, I began to think of names for him and to picture how he would come when I called.

Warming him against my heavy jacket didn’t waken him. Clearly my jacket sleeve wasn’t warm enough. So when I entered the house through the back door, into the kitchen, and heard my mother busy upstairs with the baby, I carefully turned on the oven. I knew enough to set it to a low temperature so that it would warm and waken my mouse gradually. Then I laid him gently inside the oven. I guess I got busy with my paper dolls and forgot to check on him for a while. I don’t remember, exactly. But that would explain why it was my mother who first notice that there was something baking. I always felt that if I had only had a chance to explain, and to prepare her a bit, it wouldn’t have been such a surprise to her when she opened the oven that day. I felt that if she had just looked at my very innocent face, my wide-open, completely uncriminal eyes –instead of screaming at me, for no reason whatsoever – the whole incident would have been handled better.

I have always felt that she overreacted.

By Lois Lowry